

Thumbing a Ride for GENEALOGY

When I was going to college, I occasionally thumbed my way down the highway back to my parents' house for the weekend. My hitchhiking days are behind me now, but I have had the opportunity recently to do some traveling and visiting with family. On those visits, I've been struck with how common personal computers have become. Most members of my extended family have at least one in their homes. Sometimes, the PC is used by the whole family, sometimes just by the kids for homework and online chats. But a PC is usually somewhere in the house, in a spare bedroom or in the den.

On Borrowed PCs

In my professional and personal life, I'm used to hauling around a laptop when I travel. On our family vacations to visit kinfolk we usually bring a laptop to share genealogy and pictures with the rest of the family. It's also a convenient way to take notes while the family reminisces. You never know when Aunt Ethel will drop that gem of genealogical information you need.

As I noticed that more and more of my relatives had their own personal computers, I began to wonder if carrying my laptop into their homes was really necessary. Surely I could find a way to bring a disc or something with our family history on it rather than a bulging laptop bag full of cords and cables.

I have thought that it must be possible to travel with both my genealogical data and a way to update it on some sort of portable media. Of course I

could always use a PDA, but they can be expensive. If I had some compatible media, when I visit relatives who have a PC, I could insert the portable media on their PC and view our shared genealogy. I would also want to be able to add to my information on the spot if it becomes necessary. I concluded that the media has to be something common enough that most of my relatives' PCs could handle it.

Opposable Thumbs

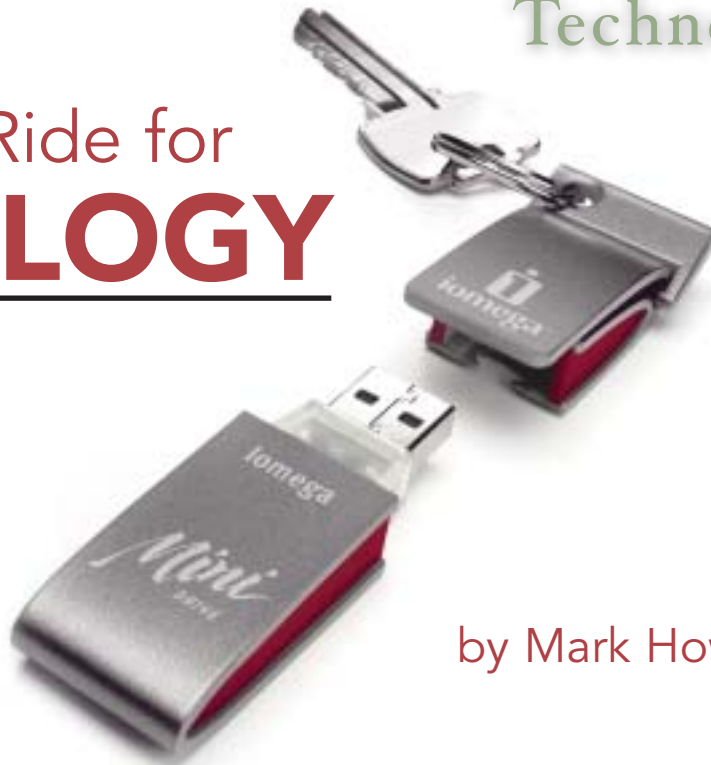
So what portable media should I use? Floppy disks don't hold enough information; CD-ROMs won't record data if the borrowed computer doesn't have a burner; Zip® or other high-capacity disks require their own drives and are expensive. None of these were the solution.

The answer came to me in the form of a problem at work. The company I work for is always concerned about our intellectual property walking out the door inappropriately. We control the use of CD-ROM burners because

of the amount of data they make portable. One day a colleague mentioned that if we were concerned about CD-ROM burners, we should be equally concerned about the new mini-USB or thumb drives that fit on a key chain. These are solid-state (no moving parts) data storage devices that can carry between eight and 256 megabytes of data. They slide into any available USB (Universal Service Bus) port and are plug-and-play. You don't have to install any additional software to make them work.

Computers recognize them as an additional storage device like a hard drive or a floppy disk, and they have a bandwidth of 1.5 megabytes a second. While they are not small computers like PDAs, thumb drives have the advantage of being much less expensive and requiring no special software or hardware.

At about two inches long, an inch wide, and less than an ounce in weight, the term "portable" is an understatement for these things. Dell



by Mark Howells

Computer Corporation now offers thumb drives on some of its standard models in place of floppy drives. While thumb drives typically hold 64 or 128 megabytes (which cost \$30 to \$50), 1- and 2-gigabyte drives are also available. With a thumb drive, you can carry a mountain of data in your pocket, and with the available privacy software, you can password-protect your data as well.

Genealogy on Your Key Chain

USB ports have become so ubiquitous on home computers that I realized a thumb drive could be used to carry genealogy data into Aunt Ethel's

my thumb drive. But what if Aunt Ethel doesn't have genealogy software? To carry the file and to read it on the thumb drive, some sort of genealogy software would have to be on the thumb drive as well.


My first inclination was to load my regular genealogy software onto the thumb drive. However, I decided to be lazy (rather than search for the installation discs) and simply copy over the contents of each genealogy software directory I use onto the thumb drive rather than installing directly. In just a few minutes, I had five different genealogy software programs copied onto my thumb drive.

computer. *Legacy*[®] and *The Master Genealogist*[®] did not work. Please note that your favorite brand or version of genealogy software may behave differently than what I encountered with the five I tested. I can't give you specific instructions for how to put every type of genealogy software on a thumb drive since this article is only intended to give you the general concept.


I must confess I was surprised that any program worked at all. I was under the illusion that when most software was installed, it made modifications to your PC's configuration files which were then specific to your PC. If the borrowed computer did not have these modifications to its configuration file, the software would not run. This turned out not to be the case for three of the five programs I tested.

My version of *Family Tree Maker*[®] did not allow me to create or work on a data file that was stored on removable media like the thumb drive. It gave me a very helpful message explaining this. To get around this, I simply copied the *Family Tree Maker*[®] data file from the thumb drive to the borrowed PC. Then I ran the software off the thumb drive and directed it to open the data file on the PC's hard drive. This fixed the problem. Just remember to copy the data file back onto your thumb drive before you leave Aunt Ethel's house. Otherwise, your changes will not go with you.

Of the two programs that did not work, each one came back with a message that I was missing "file x." Obviously, there were more files I needed to copy to the thumb drive from my PC in order to make the programs run off the thumb drive. I didn't pursue this any further but the problem is not insurmountable. By reading your software manual or help files, or by calling the manufacturer's technical support, you should be able to get the full list of files and directories needed to make your genealogy software truly portable.



These mini data storage devices slide into any available USB port and are plug-and-play.



house. Having a thumb drive in your pocket is a much less imposing sight than arriving with a large black laptop bag strung over one shoulder. A little sweet talk and you should be able to convince your relatives to allow you to use their computer to plug it in. I finally purchased a 256-megabyte thumb drive for under \$100 and began experimenting with carrying genealogical data.

The first dilemma in carrying genealogy data on a thumb drive is knowing the file format to use and having the software to read it. Each genealogy software program creates a different file format; it's not enough just to carry your raw data file. For instance, if I use *Family Tree Maker*[®] but Aunt Ethel uses *PAF*[®], her software won't read my *Family Tree Maker* file. I could easily convert my raw data file into a GEDCOM file and carry that on

The five programs with their associated data files almost maxed-out my thumb drive. I only had 15 out of 256 megabytes remaining. (Remember, this was just for testing purposes. You are not likely to need five genealogy programs.)

Now that I had my thumb drive loaded, I sought out a home PC with an available USB port but with no pre-existing genealogy software loaded on it. I plugged in the thumb drive to see what programs and files I could access.

The Bake-Off

Of the five programs I tried, *PAF*[®] and *Generations*[®] worked off the thumb drive immediately. I could open them on the thumb drive and then use the software to read and modify the associated genealogy data files. *Family Tree Maker*[®] worked after I copied its data file to the borrowed

In any case, this problem shouldn't stop you from using your favorite genealogy software. One option may be to install the software directly onto the thumb drive from the software installation disc. Of course, this may not work at all with some software. Mine was an imprecise experiment with a handful of programs. Your results may vary.

What Else Can You Do?

If your favorite genealogy software program absolutely refuses to function properly on a thumb drive, you can always resort to using a GEDCOM file instead. Use your existing software to convert your genealogy data file into a GEDCOM file format and simply copy the GEDCOM onto your thumb drive. Then go online and download a free GEDCOM viewer program (see <www.cyndislist.com/gedcom.htm#Viewers>). These are typically simple programs without all the bells and whistles of a full-featured genealogy software program. Their smaller size commends them for use on a thumb drive.

Find one you like and test it by running it off a thumb drive. Not all GEDCOM viewers allow you to edit the GEDCOM file you are viewing. Remember that if you edit the GEDCOM file held on your thumb drive, you will have to migrate the new information on your thumb drive GEDCOM to your genealogy file of record on your primary PC. This process of file conversions and merges between GEDCOM and your genealogy software file format can get messy so read the instructions carefully and proceed with caution.

One of the most obvious applications for a thumb drive is using it for backup purposes. Copying your most important files onto a thumb drive periodically can ensure that you can recover these files if something goes wrong with your PC. The portability

of the thumb drive makes using it for offsite storage of backups a natural. Backup your important stuff onto a thumb drive and ask a family member to keep it for you or store it at your place of work. Wherever you decide to store it, it will be safe from not only a PC failure but also from damage or destruction to your home.

Things to Keep in Mind

Big storage capacity on tiny devices still amazes me. While thumb drives seem to be just the ticket for carrying your genealogy between PCs, there are some cautions to remember:

- Read the licensing agreement for your genealogy software to ensure that you may make additional copies of the software.
- Don't use your thumb drive-based genealogy data as your only copy of genealogical data. Think of your thumb drive copy as a backup of your original data on your PC.
- Keep the anti-virus software on your PC updated with anti-virus patterns. When moving your thumb drive between PCs, you don't want to give Aunt Ethel a computer virus. And you don't want the thumb drive bringing a virus to your PC from Aunt Ethel's PC either.
- Use the thumb drive's privacy software to password-protect it so no one can access your genealogy software and data files.

Used properly, a thumb drive will easily let your genealogy "hitch a ride" on Aunt Ethel's PC. ☞

Mark Howells gives technology two thumbs up at markhow@oz.net.

PASSENGER LISTS

Searches are now available of the following ports for your ancestor's arrival in America.

	<u>Indexes to lists</u>	<u>Pass. Lists</u>
New York City	1820-1948	1820-1940
Philadelphia	1727-1948	1727-1945
Baltimore	1820-1952	1820-1909
Boston	1848-91,1902-20	1820-1943
New Orleans	1813-1952	1820-1903
Misc. Atlantic & Gulf Ports	1820-1874	most avail.
San Francisco	1850-75,1893-1934	1850-1875
Galveston, TX	1896-1951	1896-1948
Gulfport, MS	1904-1954	-
New Bedford, MA	1875-99,1902-54	1902-1942
Portland, ME	1893-1954	1893-1943
Providence, RI	1911-1954	1911-1931
AL, FL, GA, SC	1890-1924	-
Charleston, SC	1820-1829	1820-1829
Savannah, GA	1890-1924	1906-1945
New England	1600's	1600's

Information given on lists generally includes ship's name, arrival date, passenger's names, age, sex, occupation, nationality, and sometimes literacy, destination, class of travel (first class, steerage, etc.), embarkation port, and on 1880's lists, sometimes place of birth!

Beginning about 1890: generally all of the above plus departure date, marital status, race, last residence, name and address of close relative or friend in homeland, how much money carried, whether ever in U.S. before, name and address of a relative or contact in the U.S., health, height, weight, hair and eye color, and from about 1920, planned length of stay and citizenship intentions!

Search fees: Index search: **\$19.00** (one passenger / one port) or 3 ports for **\$45.00**
Pass. List search **\$17.00** (one list)

IMPORTANT:
Index search **AND** List search **BOTH** needed unless you already know name of ship and **EXACT** arrival date AND port. (If not found in index, List search fee will be refunded.) If port is unknown, I suggest a 3-port search beginning with the (larger) ports at the top of the list. Indexes are generally everyname (not just head of household).

If found on list, photocopies of pages from list showing passenger's name and ship's name will be provided along with cost quote for copy of entire list and for history of ship and shipping line, often including a picture of the ship!

Please provide passenger's name and approximate birth year, port(s) of entry to be searched, approximate arrival date, and any other identifying info., such as homeland, occupation, and names of family members accompanying the passenger.

"We have found many passengers missed by the new Ellis Island index. Please give us a try."

ACCURACY the top priority.
25 years research experience.
Send fees, plus long SASE please.

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